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# **For richer or poorer in sickness or for wealth: What price consumerism?**

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**Key words:** Consumerism, well-being, social-dilemma, sustainability, technology, environment

## **ABSTRACT**

Affluence and material goods of varying types are portents of a millennium age consumer culture that encourages the masses to voluntarily participate in the need to buy, buy and buy! This trend to spend creates a purchasing fervour that preoccupies many consumers with the ongoing yearning to shop until they drop. Clever marketing tactics such as enticing smells, catchy jingles, prize-draw entries, lucrative sales, discounts and the recruitment of celebrities to advertise a range of different wares; are just some of the ploys adopted by vendors and retailers to maintain the sustainability of this cycle of consumer-spending. This scenario promotes what could be perceived as a never ending desire to procure yet more products and merchandise, which can create social dilemmas such as personal debt due to for example, impulse buying, excessive spending and unnecessary borrowing.

Retailers and manufacturers are driven by a quest to sell so constantly tout their goods to tempt consumers including those with a need for personal and social respect, to take the bait in order to encourage them to keep buying. This coupled with the rapid advancement in technology over recent decades, has made it easier for consumers to shop, order, obtain and pay for their goods from the comfort of an armchair or via hand-held devices, and all at a tap of a button. In essence, technology has added to, or even exacerbated the materialistic consumer trend as witnessed across many global societies today - from the east and the west to the north and the south. But what impact does consumerism have on the wellbeing of humankind and in turn the environment? This paper adopts a comparative approach to answer this question by exploring the implications of consumerism as a means for broadening the topic's framework and to contribute to debates regarding consumerism, wellbeing, social-dilemma, sustainability and techno-economics.

## **Keywords**

consumerism, wellbeing, social-dilemma, sustainability and techno-economics

## 1: INTRODUCTION

Affluence and material goods of varying types are portents of a millennium age consumer culture that encourages the masses to voluntarily participate in the need to buy, buy and buy! “Consumerism appears to have become part and parcel of the very fabric of modern life” (Miles, 1998), hence why it can be argued that we now live in a world where the consumers `must-have` or `need` desires are paramount (ibid).

This trend to spend creates a purchasing fervour that preoccupies many consumers with the ongoing yearning to shop until they drop. Such a strategy makes it difficult for consumers to resist the temptation to keep on purchasing (Cauvin, Young & Salmon, 2005). Clever marketing tactics relating to “the steps involved in moving goods from production to the point of ultimate consumption” (Shapiro, 1973), such as, enticing smells, catchy jingles, prize-draw entries, lucrative sales, discounts and the recruitment of celebrities to advertise arrange of different wares: are just some of the ploys adopted by vendors and retailers to maintain the sustainability of this cycle of consumer-spending. As Fleck, Korchia and Le Roy (2012) recognised, using celebrities to endorse brands, is not only a key marketing topic, but one that is very popular.

Nonetheless, this marketing scenario promotes a never ending desire to procure yet more products and merchandise, in addition to a need to identify why consumers are so tempted to keep on buying. One might ask, is this “because they need to purchase something” (Tauber, 1972), regardless as to whether it is required? Or, is it solely due to clever marketing tactics that more often than not, are not governed by the consumer’s best interests and in some instances could be rendered unfair. According to Zaltman, Srivastavas and Deshpande, (1978), “Perceptions of unfair marketing practices are related to consumer complaint behaviour”, which perhaps is not altogether surprising.

However, what is evident, is that the need to spend can create social dilemmas such as personal debt often associated with those “of adverse family economic conditions” (Lea, Webley & Levine, 1993). Moreover, it can also encourage impulse buying, excessive spending and unnecessary borrowing that can make the personal debt situation seem like a never-ending financial problem.

Retailers and manufacturers are driven by a quest to sell so constantly tout their goods to tempt consumers including those with a need for personal and social respect, to take the bait in order to encourage them to keep on buying. “Tempting consumers to purchase” (Cauvain, Young & Salmon, 2005), is not altogether a difficult task, which is evident in the way retailers make use of appealing aromas such as the smell of “a freshly baked cake or baguette fresh from the oven” that “leaves many of us salivating (Cauvain, Young & Salmon, 2005) and eager to consume! Or, the fragrant smell of perfume that suggests “indulgence; pleasure; luxury” (Sell, 2006). This coupled with the rapid advancement in technology over recent decades, has made it easier for the merchandiser to “maintain a flow of new products used to provide such delights (ibid). Moreover, technology makes it easier for consumers to shop, order, obtain and pay for their goods from the comfort of an armchair or via hand-held devices, and all at a tap of a button. In essence, technology has added to, or even exacerbated the materialistic consumer trend as witnessed across many global societies today - from the east and the west to the north and the south. But what impact does consumerism have on the wellbeing of humankind and in turn the environment?

This paper adopts a comparative approach to answer this question by exploring the implications of consumerism as a means for broadening the topic’s framework and to contribute to debates regarding consumerism, wellbeing, social-dilemma, sustainability and techno-economics.

It begins by reviewing various definitions of consumerism to gain greater understanding of its meaning today. The paper then reviews the relationship that technology has to consumerism. An exploration of consumerism’s impact on for example, personal wealth, health and wellbeing, in addition to the environment, then follows. This precedes the discussion of insights gained from the various perspectives presented in this paper that form the conclusions at the end.

## **2. DEFINING CONSUMERISM**

The literature makes evident that consumerism is a term that can be defined in several ways. Namely, Kotler (1971), regards consumerism as a “social movement seeking to augment the rights and power of buyers in relation to sellers”, which suggests the bartering of goods and services.

This notion is supported by Payne (2010), who not only believes consumerism is the name attributed to our “current socio-economic system”, but asserted that from an economical point of view, consumerism “focuses on the consumption of goods and services”.

However, Trentmann (2012), defines consumerism from a dissimilar standpoint to that of Kotler (1971) and Payne (2010). Instead, Trentmann describes consumerism as the “mirror of the human condition” regarding what and how people consume. This latter standpoint is indicative of what Trentmann (2012), believes to be our views regarding how the consumer should live.

Moreover, Day and Aaker, (1970), describes consumerism as “the evolving activities of government, business, independent organisation and concerned consumers to protect and enhance the rights of consumers”.

However, one could ask whether consumerism is “a temporary or permanent social phenomenon?” (Kotler, 1971); as it would seem that there are those who believe that the consumer movement is one destined to pass, while others argue that consumerism today is a societal beast that differs from earlier movements and is therefore more inclined to be here for some time to come and is therefore likely to “continue to fuel the consumer movement (ibid).

Notwithstanding, Trentmann (2012) recognised that there are few subjects that have undergone such a detailed shift in viewpoints over the last fifty years, and although consumerism was “routinely decried for most of the twentieth century as leading to alienation, waste and selfish materialism: consumption in the 1970s and 1980s”, it emerged

in a renewed and more optimistic form to be “hailed as a source of creativity and meaning central to social relations and identity formation (ibid).

In essence consumerism or consumption, once regarded as “the object of condescension” (Trentmann, 2012; Fromm, 1966) has now “emerged as the very stuff of history” (ibid), that has “stepped out of the shadow of production.

Man(kind) has become a Homo Consumens who is “voracious, passive, and tries to compensate for his inner emptiness by continuous and ever-increasing consumption” (Trentmann, 2012 Fromm, 1966;) that has replaced Homo Faber: man as the maker (Thomas & Brown, 2011).

### **3. TECHNOLOGY AND CONSUMERISM**

The explosion and advancement of new technology, has revolutionised the retail market (Meuter, Ostrom, Bitner & Roundtree, 2003) in numerous ways. Today we are privy to the “emergence of the internet as a tool for the business-to-consumer” (Klopping & McKinney, 2004). This approach has far reaching consequences that has “created opportunities for businesses to reach out to consumers in a very direct way” (ibid). Consequently, the need to physically visit a department centre or shopping complex to purchase a range of wares, is no longer a `must` but an option making it easier for consumers to succumb to the temptation to buy at leisure.

As Cheong & Morrison (2008), acknowledged, since the arrival of the Internet, “the influence of online recommendations on consumer decision making has attracted great attention”. On-line sites that enables the user to send tweets or to blog such as, “YouTube, MySpace and Facebook, are growing rapidly and frequently feature comments about brands and products” (ibid). E-Bay is another popular on-line purchasing space that could be described as a shopper`s delight as it is a forum where consumers are almost destined to secure a bargain or two, triggering a potential growth in the army of on-line shoppers of every persuasion.

A desire to buy, is not the only factor that is likely to influence consumers to use technology to shop. Research evidence suggests that other issues to consider are usability, compatibility and security, recognised as “significant predictors of attitude towards on-line shopping” (Vijayasarathy, 2004). Moreover, trust and the pleasure gained from shopping, are other things

that play a significant role in “consumers’ adoption of e-shopping” (Ha & Stoel, 2009). This is besides being a means-to-an-end for people like the physically impaired or those who are restricted: carers who do not have the flexibility to leave home to spend, or those suffering from agoraphobia so fear open spaces preferring instead to remain in the comfort and security of their own homes.

Nonetheless, it is worth acknowledging that “not all consumers choose to use the new technologies nor do all consumers see these changes as improvements” (Meuter, Ostrom, Bitner, & Roundtree, (2003). Furthermore, developers of website should be reminded that customers are not only web users with trust/safety and information needs, but also shoppers with service and experiential needs (Ha & Stoel, 2009), that can make the difference as to whether they try or buy.

Another aspect of technology in relation to consumerism, is its far-reaching consequences with regards to for instance, the role that technology plays in harvesting or syphoning natural resources. This realisation has triggered a growth in interest in the techno-economics of, for example “constructing a carbon-dioxide pipeline network” (Lone, Cockerill & Macchietto, 2010) in Britain.

Additionally, Hawkes, Brett & Brandon, (2009), recognised the significance of techno-economies when they conducted a study that “explored the concept and mathematical treatment for a techno-economic modelling framework designed to enable exploration of fuel cell micro combined heat and power (micro-CHP) system design and control” (Hawkes, Brett & Brandon, 2009). The intention was to provide the means that would assist “to focus research and development attention on the system characteristics critical for commercial success of these technologies” (ibid) in addition to ensuring policy creators, present cost targets for developers, and to ensure policy makers supply the relevant instruments required to “support commercialisation” (Hawkes, Brett & Brandon, 2009).

#### **4. CONSUMERISM’S IMPACT**

As recognised by Miles, (1998), consumerism is now a significant everyday part of modern life that is near impossible to escape. Even “areas of social life that were previously free of the demands of the marketplace, including religion, have had to adapt to a world where the needs and desires of the consumer are apparently paramount” (ibid).

Consequently, it should come as no surprise to learn that “consumers are constantly being exposed to marketing stimuli (Mukhopadhyay & Johar, 2006), which allows for the stranglehold and impact that consumerism has on society and its people. Moreover, the indication is “how we consume, why we consume and the parameters laid down for us within which we consume have become increasingly significant influences on how we construct” the way we live from one day to another (Miles, 1998).

### **Impact on the environment**

As asserted by Hirsh & Dolderman, (2007), the terms “consumerism and Environmentalism are often viewed as mutually opposing constructs”. Furthermore, while consumerism places emphasis on “the accumulation and consumption of material resources”, environmentalism “advocates resource conservation and long-term sustainability” (ibid).

Consumerism has and continues to have an impact on the environment in a variety of different ways (Orecchia & Zoppoli, 2007). For example, increasing levels of consumption results in a surge in levels of production. This phenomenon requires “larger inputs of energy and material and generate larger quantities of waste by products” (ibid). Moreover, “increased extraction and exploitation of natural resources”, plus the “accumulation of waste and concentration of pollutants, can damage the environment and, in the long run, limit economic activity” (Orecchia & Zoppoli, 2007), which often typifies less developed societies. Not only can this scenario destabilise economies, but can threaten business sustainability.

On the other-hand, it can be charged that “the rapid economic growth in the economy and the patterns of consumers’ consumption” (Chen & Chai, 2010), in addition to “behavior worldwide are the main cause of environmental deterioration” (ibid). Furthermore, the worsening “environment has become a persistent public concern in the developed countries” (Chen & Chai, 2010), that “has recently awakened developing countries to the green movement” (ibid).

Furthermore, there is significant data that shows different levels of consumption highlighting for example, “the problematic environmental impact of, for instance, increasing private vehicular traffic, expanding meat consumption, rising energy use due to the spread of electrical devices” (Lange & Meier, 2009).

### **The consequences of being out of `pocket`**



“The shopper says, “I really shouldn’t,” transfixed with infatuated desire. The budget is tight, the price is too high, the item is not desperately needed, and so the shopper should not buy it” (Baumeister, 2002). Yet, lurking in the backdrop of these rational concerns, “is a murky alliance of wants, impulses, and emotions, all clamoring for the gratification of the purchase and wanting to believe that the purchased product will bring true happiness” (ibid), although this is likely to be short-lived and instead the willing shopper finds themselves deeply in debt and so there goes another consumer casualty.

According to Lea, Webley & Levine, (1993), “debt was strongly correlated with economic factors”. The conjecture is that debt is likely to be “a consequence of adverse family economic conditions” (ibid) and that “serious debtors were of lower socioeconomic class, had lower income, and were less likely to own their own home” (Lea, Webley & Levine, 1993): although arguably, debt as a state of being, is not exclusive to this more deprived socioeconomic-group.

Nonetheless, one cannot ignore as suggested by Bauman, (2004) that “the poor will always be with us: this much we can learn from popular wisdom”. However, “what popular wisdom is not as confident and outspoken about” (ibid), is answering that awkward question regarding “how the poor are made to be poor, and how much the way they are made and seen depends on the way we all – ordinary people, neither rich or poor – live our daily lives” (Bauman, 2004) in environments that tend to be governed by consumerism.

This consumerism scenario can stimulate the need to impulsively buy, akin to when a “hungry person sees food and feels an impulse to eat it” (Baumeister, 2002). Similarly, impulse shoppers experience an often irresistible urge to buy. To act on such an impulse can result in consumer regrets particularly if it contradicts with an individual’s long-term money-saving goals because they have succumbed to the impulse (ibid).

### **The implications for health and wellbeing**

Loewenstein & O'Donoghue, (2006) proposed that if we were to endure the “misfortune to be interrogated, and the experience resembles its depiction in movies,” then the interrogator is likely to inform us that “we can do this the easy or the hard way”. In other words, the covert

threat from the interrogator is that we are going “to spill the beans” (ibid) and that “the only question” according to Loewenstein & O'Donoghue, (2006) would be whether we were “going to get tortured-which is the hard way” (ibid).

Consumption poses a similar scenario, however, in this instance, the torturer happens to be the self (Loewenstein & O'Donoghue, 2006). Such a realisation can cause stress and mental agony that has a negative impact on personal wellbeing (Abela, 2006; Sweeting, Hunt & Bhaskar, 2012).

Furthermore, “theoretical approaches in psychology agree that prioritizing money and associated aims is negatively associated with individuals’ well-being” (Dittmar, Bond, Hurst & Kasser, 2014).

As humans we are “inherently myopic” (Loewenstein & O'Donoghue, 2006). This is because we are trained by self or others (parents, guardians, teachers etc) “to experience immediate negative emotions such as guilt and fear when we succumb to various types of temptations” (ibid) such as unnecessary or excessive spending.

Such (negative) emotions “impose costs with no corresponding benefits-much like spilling the beans after being tortured” (Loewenstein & O'Donoghue, 2006) and that “in such instances. People, in effect, pay twice for their indulgences: they incur the material negative consequences that result, and they also experience negative emotions as a result of their lapse” (ibid).

Notwithstanding, consumerism is not only an adult affliction, as it is also negatively associated to well-being in adolescents and children (Sweeting,Hunt & Bhaskar, 2012). Moreover, there is a modicum of studies that explore “whether certain aspects of consumerism have stronger associations with well-being than others, or between-group differences in associations” (ibid).

What is evident however, is that people purchase and consume in order to improve the quality of their lives (McGregor, 2007), but there are “costs associated with this practice (financial, time, ecological, societal and human): for the individual and the collective.

## **5. DISCUSSION**

This paper provides several valuable insights drawn from various studies and debates regarding consumerism. This includes the different ways in which consumerism, which

Trentmann (2012), describes as the “mirror of the human condition”, is defined, which makes evident a common agreement that consumerism is a social movement that is closely correlated to the purchase and consumption of goods and services relating to a person’s lifestyle.

Cauvain, Young, Salmon, (2005), described societies trend to spend that goods consumers to keep on purchasing. This inevitably promotes a never-ending cycle of buying making it difficult for consumers to resist the temptation (Cauvin, Young & Salmon, 2005), to buy just one more item!

The literature demonstrates how difficult it is for consumers to resist the call to shop. Furthermore, retailers and marketers admit that tempting consumers to buy is a fairly easy task” (Cauvain, Young & Salmon, 2005). They deploy numerous tactics such as using sweet smelling fragrances that instigates feelings of pleasure (Sell, 2006), or ensure passers-by can smell the waft of freshly baked bread that is bound to make them salivate stoking their desire to buy, so that they can gorge themselves to oblivion.

But as Loewenstein & O'Donoghue, (2006), recognised, there is a price to pay for the lapsing dieter: Not only must they “deal with the health and appearance consequences of overeating” (ibid), but they must also deal with the “guilt and shame” experienced “while eating” (ibid). There are more than just a few who would prefer to deny the evident cause of their overeating.

This thought reminds me of an acquaintance who would enthusiastically share her insight to yet another diet fad, while showcasing the tiny morsels of food on her plate to all and sundry. It was evident that she wanted to showcase how little she ate, which was something that became a constant reminder to those within ear-shot. But, instead of losing weight, she began to pile it on. Then all was revealed when I saw this person purchasing a large bag of freshly baked jam donuts before consuming each one whole in a place where they mistakenly thought they would not be seen, but alas this was not the case.

Nonetheless, as acknowledged celebrities are often used to sell market goods (Fleck, Korchia & Le Roy, 2012), which has proved lucrative for many big brand retailers.

However, consumerism affects the environment (Orecchia & Zoppoli, 2007) as it increases production and “larger inputs of energy and material” generating “larger quantities of waste

by products” (ibid). This was not the only impact as consumerism also, “increased extraction and exploitation of natural resources” (ibid), which is a threat to economies in addition to business sustainability.

What was also evident as recognised by McGregor, (2007), is the reason why people generally tend to have a strong urge to consume. This, McGregor believes is because they want to improve their quality of life despite the costs that they are likely to incur regardless of whether they can afford it. For many the feeling of euphoria that this spending consumerism cycle provides is well and truly worth it.

## **6. CONCLUSION**

The question posed at the beginning of this paper was “what impact does consumerism have on the wellbeing of humankind and in turn the environment?” The insights gained as presented in this paper, has helped to provide answers to this question.

Namely, consumerism can have a negative impact on the less affluent socially challenged people in society, who are encouraged to spend what they can often ill afford. This leads to debt at best in the short-term, and at worse over the long-term, negative emotions when the realisation of the consequences of their overspending comes to bear.

Nevertheless, we cannot ignore the pleasure that shopping affords and the happiness felt by those consumers who are governed by an impulse to buy. “Rebus sic stantibus, believed that consumerism, as a term used by sociologists to describe the effects of equating personal happiness with purchasing material possessions, can even do worse (damage), as long as it determines an increase in the amount of purchased goods” (Orecchia, & Zoppoli, 2007).

An increase in consumerism challenges the environment that can affect the way we live our lives. Hirsh & Dolderman, (2007), distinguished the difference between the materialistically driven individual and their environmentally aware counterpart by asserting that “highly materialistic individuals are known to be selfish, possessive, and to place a greater value on the accumulation of material possessions. Conversely, environmentally concerned individuals are more often motivated by compassion, social concern, and a broader self-concept”.

We cannot ignore as demonstrated, that the “The continuous outpouring of new products in the economy will continue to raise questions of health, safety and planned obsolescence” (Kotler, 1971).

Already there are signs that those from more affluent societies, are concerned that the “consumption problem” is growing in many corners of everyday life- even in the paragon of consumer society, the United States (Conca, Maniates & Princen, 2002).

As acknowledged, technology plays a significant part in consumerism’s growth and impact, as the advancement in technology has revolutionised the retail market (Meuter, Ostrom, Bitner & Roundtree, 2003). This makes it much easier for consumers to buy and for retailers and marketers to tout their wares for example, within the confines of office buildings, in the classroom and in peoples` homes, without having to step foot on these thresholds while allowing businesses to reach consumers directly (Klopping & McKinney, 2004).

The lesson to be learnt here, is that we all play a significant role in loosening the grip that consumerism has on our health, wealth and environment. And as the Chinese Philosopher Confucius asserted, “the Master said, “If your conduct is determined solely by considerations of profit you will arouse great resentment.”

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